

# Looking Forward, Looking Back: Shaping Professional Visions of HPE Through Critical Reflection

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*Marie enrolled in the teacher education program to become an elementary teacher, a decision that did not include the realization that she may be responsible for teaching Health and Physical Education (HPE). In the first of four pre-service HPE classes Marie expressed feeling very fearful, as she did not see herself as a healthy and active person able to translate the required knowledge, skills, and values to her students. In essence, she did not identify herself as a physically literate individual or teacher. The experiences, images, and beliefs that she brought with her to this learning experience influenced her lack of self-confidence and affected what she thought she was able to learn and do. This reflects the experience that many pre-service teachers bring to teacher education programs as their images and beliefs serve as filters for making sense of the knowledge and experiences they encounter, and as barriers to change by limiting the ideas that teachers are able and willing to entertain (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Marie's past experiences were filters and barriers that limited her ability to embrace teaching HPE with confidence and enacting physical literacy.*

*By the end of the course, Marie approached the instructor, crying with excitement and feeling empowered to teach HPE. The course focused on helping pre-service teachers to be innovators, thinkers, and implementers of the HPE curriculum rather than purely transmitting a set of skills to teach HPE. This enabled Marie to focus on developing her vision for what, how, and why she would teach HPE as an elementary teacher. Some light had shone on the darkest corners of Marie's fear and illuminated the barriers to this seemingly daunting and impossible task. Her journey of self-discovery about her personal health and well-being ignited her image as a*

*physically literate person and teacher, which enabled her to connect her new-found values and ideals to her teaching. Marie reconstructed her own vision as a teacher through her experiences; this allowed her to create a professional identity that included confidence in her ability to pass on the importance of physical literacy to her students.*

Marie's story is not uncommon amongst teachers who are learning to teach HPE. Often, their experiences of HPE consisted mainly of learning sport-specific skills rather than focusing on developing a broad range of abilities that enable

individuals to understand, communicate, apply, and analyze different forms of movement in various activities (Francis, 2009). HPE teachers play a pivotal role in developing and implementing programs that shape how students develop a sense of physical literacy and come to see themselves as physically literate individuals. According to Humbert (2006, p. 21), "the health of young people depends on physical education teachers making a difference." This further emphasizes the need to explore the role physical literacy can play in shaping teachers' own visions of HPE.





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In this paper we explore the HPE experiences of seventeen pre-service teachers to investigate their understanding of themselves as physically literate individuals and teachers. We also outline how those involved in educating teachers (for example, teacher education faculty, associate teachers, and those involved in in-service education) can use physical literacy as an organizing framework to help individuals critically reflect upon their own HPE experiences. Critical reflection involves deconstructing and reconstructing knowledge that has been learned through experience; this process is essential in preparing teachers, and can be used to shape professional visions of teaching (Beattie, 2006).

### **The role of experiences and the importance of a vision for teaching**

Teachers bring with them a wide variety of experiences that shape how they think about and carry out their professional roles. Through this *apprenticeship of observation* (Lortie, 1975), teachers' experiences of HPE programs throughout elementary and secondary school, as well as their experiences with sport, recreation, or leisure activities outside of school, may

have profound effects on their visions about what HPE programs should consist of and what their goals should be. Those who are learning to teach need to think about and understand teaching in ways that are quite different from their own experience as students (Hammerness, Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). Teaching involves a process of deconstruction and reconstruction of our experiences in order to create visions of teaching and learning deemed appropriate for today's classrooms. This suggests that teachers' experiences play a critical role in developing their vision of professional practice.

Kosnik and Beck (2009) offer three reasons for having a well-developed vision for teaching. First, a vision keeps teachers aware of the full range of goals and processes of teaching. Second, a vision helps teachers see how the various aspects of teaching fit together. And third, a vision can help teachers explain to their students the purposes of schooling and particular classroom practices. In essence, this involves thinking not only about the *what* and *how* of teaching, but also the *why*. Thus, if teaching a unit on territorial games, beginning teachers need not only

ask themselves what they are going to teach (e.g., strategies and tactics, fundamental skills, social skills), and how they are going to teach it (e.g., TGfU approach, student-centred), they must also ask themselves why it is important to teach the unit in the first place (e.g., learning skills and strategies that transfer to a variety of activities for lifelong participation and enjoyment).

### **Using critical reflection to think about physical literacy**

Physical literacy offers a useful way for beginning teachers to think deeply about the *what*, *how*, and *why* of teaching HPE. As Whitehead (2001) claimed, physical literacy enables individuals to realize their potential in a variety of domains (e.g., physical, social, and emotional) and enhance their quality of life; it is essential to a complete experience of human life. Some individuals feel disengaged from HPE because they struggle to make meaningful connections between their lives and the curriculum (Ennis, 2008). One reason Marie felt fearful of teaching HPE was because she found it challenging to make meaningful connections between her HPE experiences and her own life. However, by critically reflecting on these

*Pre-service teachers have a wide variety of experiences in educational contexts that shape how they think about and carry out their roles as teachers. In this article we describe how seventeen pre-service teachers came to see their professional visions of teaching health and physical education (HPE) through a process of reflecting on, deconstructing, and reconstructing their experiences. Our discussion focuses on how the concept of physical literacy can be used as an organizing framework to help teachers develop a vision for teaching that considers the whys of teaching HPE just as much as the whats and hows.*

*Les étudiants-maîtres ont la chance de vivre des expériences variées dans divers contextes éducatifs, ce qui influence leur façon de penser et de s'acquitter de leurs fonctions d'enseignement. Cet article explique comment 17 étudiants-maîtres en sont venus à définir leur vision professionnelle de l'enseignement dans le contexte des cours de santé et d'éducation physique en misant sur un processus de réflexion, de déconstruction et de reconstruction de leurs expériences. Dans le cadre de cette discussion, on a tenté d'établir en quoi le concept du savoir-faire physique peut constituer une structure organisationnelle propre à aider les enseignants à articuler une vision de l'enseignement qui tient compte tout autant du pourquoi que du quoi et du comment de l'enseignement de l'éducation physique et de la santé.*



experiences and shaping a vision of HPE teaching, she was able to articulate her own understandings of herself as a physically literate individual: someone who moves with confidence in a wide variety of physical activities that benefit the development of the whole person (Mandigo et al., 2009). In turn, she felt better prepared to explain the purposes of HPE to her students because those purposes became meaningful to her own life experience.

Marie's story highlights how important it is for those who are learning to teach HPE to critically reflect upon their experiences and develop a vision for teaching. With these ideas in mind, we were interested in exploring student teachers' experiences of HPE, their understandings of themselves as physically literate individuals and teachers, and their visions for teaching HPE. We conducted interviews with seventeen student teachers; 10 of whom were preparing to become elementary classroom teachers and received 12 hours of pre-service HPE instruction, and seven of whom were preparing to become secondary specialist HPE teachers, who received 72 hours of pre-service HPE instruction. Although our study focused on pre-service teachers, we believe the findings will resonate with in-service teachers who are learning to teach HPE.

### **Pre-service teachers' critical reflections of their experiences of HPE**

Of the 10 elementary pre-service teachers who were interviewed, most had not expected to be required to learn how to teach HPE. However, as elementary generalists, rather than HPE specialists, teach many Canadian elementary HPE classes, it is likely that they will be called upon to teach at least some HPE classes in their first few years of teaching. The seven secondary pre-service teachers interviewed all had previous experiences with physical activity in recreational and organized settings; these experiences, combined with undergraduate backgrounds in kinesiology, greatly influenced pre-service teacher understandings and visions about teaching HPE (Armour & Jones, 1998). For the most part, the

secondary pre-service teachers pursued a career in teaching HPE because their physical activity experiences were positive and they were passionate about teaching and engaging youth in healthy active living.

When asked to deconstruct their experiences, there were similarities and differences between elementary and secondary pre-service teachers. For instance, when asked about the types of activities they participated in most frequently in HPE, soccer, volleyball, basketball, and fitness testing were mentioned. However, secondary pre-service teachers recalled a wider range of experiences, many of which were gained in the school years when HPE was optional. Several participants felt their HPE activities were fun; a factor that affects an individual's motivation for and commitment towards a physically active lifestyle. However, a physically literate HPE program needs to encompass other objectives. When asked what they recalled learning in HPE, common responses included learning rules to specific games, as well as several discrete skills (such as a lay-up or dribbling). Yet no elementary pre-service teachers recalled concepts crucial to developing physical literacy, such as learning how to (a) analyze the movement of certain activities, (b) how to apply tactical concepts and skills across a wide range of activities, or (c) how to communicate their understanding and competence in movement.

Although the elementary pre-service teachers could recall *what* activities they participated in, few could recall the reasons *why* they were participating in them, or learning how these activities could help them to make healthy choices across their lifespan. For example, Campbell did not understand the purposes of doing a beep test, saying: "You just assumed it was something you had to do. You knew you were getting a mark for it, so you assumed the teacher just needed a mark." She was unaware that it could be used as an indicator of cardiovascular fitness, what the results might tell her



about her cardiovascular fitness, or how she could interpret the results to create action plans towards improved personal health.

When the secondary pre-service teachers were asked about the role of physical activity in their lives, they all suggested its significance to becoming a physically literate individual and embracing life long physical activity. When compared to the elementary pre-service teachers, they were better able to articulate an understanding of its importance and how it affects their daily lives to make healthier decisions. For example, Rick explained that physical activity influences his life daily as it, "provides me with a feeling of stress release and relaxation." Similarly, Alan suggested that it, "provides a more holistic approach to life in general... I exercise nearly every day (run, strength train, hockey) and try my best to eat healthy in order to keep fit and have fun."

Previous experiences strongly influence how pre-service teachers think about their professional roles, and our participants revealed mixed feelings about the possibility of having to teach HPE, from scared and doubtful, to excited. In line with the theory of the apprenticeship of



observation, most pre-service teachers expected that they would be required to teach the types of activities – and in the same ways – that they were taught when they were in school. As many pre-service teachers experienced HPE programs that were focused primarily on traditional team sports, some felt doubtful of their ability to teach HPE because they did not know the rules of sports (eight out of 10 elementary pre-service teachers mentioned this) or perceived their own sport-related skill set as inadequate. For the secondary pre-service teachers, two out of seven whose physical activity experiences were not team sport focused (e.g., dance or fitness) had similar concerns about their levels of HPE content knowledge being inadequate. Pre-service teachers who were excited about the prospect of teaching HPE, particularly the secondary pre-service teachers, tended to be physically active and had experiences in a wide variety of physical activities, such as swimming, skiing, hiking, or organized sports, and felt confident that they would be able to teach skills and concepts across a range of physical activities. Clara, whose experiences included dance, fitness, and participation in recreational and competitive games, commented that she has made physical activity her career and expressed that she hopes “to bring my enthusiasm and experiences to my classroom in order to help those around me.” Teachers whose experiences were similar to Clara seemed to better represent the notion of someone who is physically literate.

### Linking critical reflection with a vision for teaching

Many of the elementary pre-service teachers’ HPE experiences were narrow in scope (focused mainly on team sports), while the secondary pre-service teachers’ experiences covered a wide variety of activities; primarily because they continued to enroll in HPE beyond grade 9, when it becomes optional for Ontario students. As such, we expected their teaching visions to differ. However, upon critically reflecting on their experiences to create a vision for teaching HPE, both elementary

and secondary pre-service teachers expressed visions that link closely to the definition and characteristics of physical literacy described by Mandigo et al. (2009).

Examples include Natasha (elementary), who said that she wanted an HPE program to have relevance “so that it did not feel like we were just doing it for fun; so that it felt like it was for a reason and that it had something to do with the rest of our lives.” Similarly, Ralph (elementary) indicated that his ideal HPE program would explicitly consider the reasons “why we are doing HPE”, something he felt was lacking in his own experience. Nicole (secondary) wanted to “integrate a wide variety of organized and recreational activities” and emphasize teamwork in an inclusive educational environment. In reflecting on his vision as an HPE teacher, Jay (secondary) realized that his role included more than teaching the HPE curriculum (*what and how*); it was about changing his students’ lives (*why*).

### Implications for teaching and teacher education

Due to the influence of the apprenticeship of observation, like Tsangaridou

(2006), we found that some pre-service teachers enter teacher preparation programs with a conservative range of beliefs about teaching HPE that are based on their own HPE experiences. Pre-service teacher education programs cannot ignore the biographical experiences that student teachers bring with them; there is a need to draw from a wider spectrum of activities and physical cultures that are represented in society in order to shape visions that are consistent with the definition of physical literacy (Rich, 2004).

In the deconstruction stage of reflection, some of the teachers we interviewed did not experience HPE programs that embodied a physically literate approach to teaching HPE. However, in reconstructing their ideas about what their own HPE programs or teaching may look like, many teachers articulated the ideas and concepts of physical literacy proposed by Mandigo et al. (2009). For beginning teachers, the importance of having a professional vision of practice should not be underestimated. In their first years of teaching it is likely that teachers may be overwhelmed by the multitude of tasks





that require their attention. However, maintaining and continually reflecting upon a well-developed vision for teaching can help keep early career teachers aware of the full range of goals and processes of teaching, including program planning, assessment, and classroom culture and organization (Kosnik & Beck, 2009).

For teacher educators, associate teachers, and those involved in in-service teacher education, physical literacy presents an interesting opportunity to engage those learning to teach HPE in current HPE ideas, theories, and practices – many of which have been re-shaped and changed since they were school students. The concept of physical literacy is something that can encapsulate both broad and specific ideas that support a vision for HPE, one that focuses just as much upon the whys of teaching HPE as the whats and hows. By making physical literacy an organizing framework for critical reflection of HPE programs and HPE

teaching, both pre-service and practicing teachers may be better able to implement HPE programs that foster enjoyment and

competence in a wide variety of physical activities that enable lifelong learning and participation. ■

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